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Liz deBeer

It's Hip to be Square (Huey Lewis and the News)

“What the teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.” (Karl Menninger, American psychologist)

Despite writing an article praising the 21st century's classroom impact, I keep thinking that effective teaching has more to do with an instructor's passion, commitment, integrity, benevolence and intelligence than with modern computers, smart boards, and updated web sites. A great teacher will never be a person (or internet connection) who merely gives assignments and feedback, as most computer-based learning programs do. Of course, this is the essence of what Paulo Freire criticized about the banking theory of education, and it still applies to the 21st Century. (The banking theory of education suggests that teachers, or software, deposit ideas and facts and then test, or withdraw, the same.) If social interaction and problem solving are the kernels of significant learning, then even the coolest modern technology, or edgiest web site, is still going to fall short of what really motivates teachers and learners. In Friere's words, “Problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition” (Friere 71). Simply, talking and sharing where kids and teachers work out issues is the scenario where real learning happens—not a right/wrong exchange—regardless of whether that binary exchange is verbal or virtual.

If the power went out, we, effective 21st century teachers, would obviously still teach. We would lecture mini lessons, work in small groups or literature circles, share ideas, and challenge arguments. Kids could still learn if the lights were out and the computers were off, and it could still be entertaining and engaging. In attempting to achieve this type of environment, Friere calls for fellowship and reflection, neither of which requires fancy equipment (Friere 71). This brings to mind thoughts of teenagers who love consignment stores: It's hip to be square! What's old is new! Cardigans and caring never really go out of style.

The effectiveness of old-fashioned discussion is highlighted whenever I meet with my high school's book club—a group I initiated, of about 15 students, to read and discuss novels. (It's a club; there are no grades.) Each month, we sit in a circle, discuss the author's background, eat cookies, and chat about the chosen book. The titles are often contemporary, but our methods of reading are not: we use print copies of the books! Truthfully, of all the activities I attend each month, it's one of my favorites. After I asked a new member—a high school sophomore—what she thought of the first meeting, she exclaimed: “It was fun!” FUN?

I'm convinced many teens crave more “face time.” I once argued with a colleague that I think many teens are lonely. She scoffed. “Lonely? They are connected to their peers 24 hours a day.” True, but texting or tweeting about a sporting event or a funny YouTube video is not the same as sitting with other people, talking, listening, and sharing, like we get the opportunity to do at our high school book club meetings. Book clubs often stir up conversation, such as when we read *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine; One teen derided the narrator, who has Asperger's Syndrome. Her comment was soon followed by that of another teen, who shared that she herself has a sibling on the spectrum, and thus, a thoughtful conversation on that condition ensued. The former speaker then apologized, saying she hadn't thought much about the condition beforehand. In place of this “face time,” a phone text would have merely been deleted, or an angry text war might have transpired. In a circle, we connect, and understanding is reached. What's newer? The text. What's better? The circle.

A similar conversation erupted when my group read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Several white teens thought the narrator, Junior, was making too much of a commotion about race, so we “went there,” discussing what it must be like to be part of a minority. We shared personal experiences in which we, like Junior, felt silenced or invisible. One teen

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remarked he had “never thought about that before.” How could such a conversation be emulated via technology? Maybe a similar one could be generated with an interactive blog, but it’s not the same. When I used to train student teachers, I kept stressing them to “Make the connection.” This means both connecting with the kids and with the key points of the lesson. An effective teacher inspires kids—something that

could never be achieved by an electrical apparatus.

My school recently received a grant that gives each student a laptop, leaving me with no choice but to bring technology into the classroom. While websites like Edmodo, Quizlet, StudyIsland, and others, are helpful tools, which I gladly embrace, when former students tell me they loved my class or learned a lot, I know it’s not the website to which they are referring. It’s me.

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Liz deBeer currently teaches English at New Jersey’s Point Pleasant Beach High School and is a former adjunct professor at Rutgers University and Middlesex County College. She has earned her bachelor’s degree from University of Pennsylvania and her doctorate from Rutgers University GSE. Liz was the 2011 NJCTE Educator of the Year.

An Ode to the Timed Essay

The percussive punching of laptop keys.
The delicate surgery of longhand composition—
in each student’s hand, a pencil/scalpel.

Watch the students’ stares around the room—
concentrated, eyes narrowed;
distant, unseeing from exhaustion;
bug-eyed, eyebrows raised: that’s frustration.

Silent yawns become watery eyes.

Sneezes muffled in arm crooks.
Deep breaths sucked in
then forced out through sealed lips, bangs fluttering.

Legs kick beneath the table—
they want to be anywhere but here.

- Andy Hueller

Andy Hueller teaches English at St. Paul Academy and Summit School in Minnesota. He is the author of the children’s novels *Dizzy Fantastic* and *Her Flying Bicycle* and *Skipping Stones* at the Center of the Earth, as well as the YA novel and writing guide *How I Got Rich Writing C Papers*. Learn more about Andy and his books at andrewhueller.com.